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ABSTRACT

The theoretical perspectives of school and family partnerships discussed in this report are based on the influences of families and schools on children's learning and development. A review of research deals with three topics: (1) the importance of family environments and involvement; (2) the influence of school environments on family involvement; and (3) the effect of school-family partnerships on students, parents, and teachers. It is emphasized that effective practices of partnership are developmental and responsive to the common and different needs of families. Discussion of types of involvement that help families and schools fulfill their responsibilities for children's learning and development focuses on basic obligations of families and schools; parent involvement in schools and in home learning activities; and parent and community involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy. Also examined is involvement that adds the community as a sphere of influence. Included in the discussion are implications for future research, practice, and evaluation that relate to teacher and administrator education and training, policy development, and new ways of thinking about shared responsibilities for children. Appended are 115 references. (GLR)

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SCHOOL AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

Joyce L. Epstein

Report No. 6 / March 1992

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School and Family Partnerships

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CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING

The nation's schools must do more to improve the education of all children, but schools cannot do this alone. More will be accomplished if families and communities work with children, with each other, and with schools to promote successful students.

The mission of this Center is to conduct research, evaluations, policy analyses, and dissemination to produce new and useful knowledge about how families, schools, and communities influence student motivation, learning, and development. A second important goal is to improve the connections between and among these major social institutions.

Two research programs guide the Center's work: the Program on the Early Years of Childhood, covering children aged 0-10 through the elementary grades; and the Program on the Years of Early and Late Adolescence, covering youngsters aged 11-19 through the middle and high school grades.

Research on family, school, and community connections must be conducted to understand more about all children and all families, not just those who are economically and educationally advantaged or already connected to school and community resources. The Center's projects pay particular attention to the diversity of family cultures and backgrounds and to the diversity in family, school, and community practices that support families in helping children succeed across the years of childhood and adolescence. Projects also examine policies at the federal, state, and local levels that produce effective partnerships.

A third program of Institutional Activities includes a wide range of dissemination projects to extend the Center's national leadership. The Center's work will yield new information, practices, and policies to promote partnerships among families, communities, and schools to benefit children's learning.

Abstract

This paper presents a review of research and a perspective on school and family partnerships. It traces the development of theoretical perspectives based on the separate, sequenced, embedded, and overlapping influences of families and schools on children's learning and development. It reviews research on three topics: the importance of family environments and involvement, the importance of school environments for influencing family involvement, and effects of school-family partnerships on students, parents, and teachers. It examines the importance of recognizing that effective practices of partnership are developmental and are responsive to the common and different needs of families. It presents five types of involvement that help families and schools fulfill their shared responsibilities for children's learning and development and examines a sixth type of involvement that adds the community as a sphere of influence.

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Introduction

Which is more important for student learning and success in school -- the school or the family? Both institutions educate and socialize children, but some educators, policy leaders, and researchers focus only on families' responsibilities for their children's success, as if schools merely complete what families begin in their children's education. Others focus only on school responsibilities to motivate and teach students, as if families have nothing to do with their children's formal education.

If students fail, some blame the child and the family for their weaknesses and deficiencies. Interestingly, if students succeed, schools and families both claim responsibility, and sometimes even acknowledge each other's contributions to children's success. During the past decade new perceptions have recognized the mutual interests and overlapping influence of schools and families and the roles that schools must play to develop and maintain partnerships with students' families.

School and family partnerships is a better term for this topic than parent involvement or home-school relations. It emphasizes that the two institutions share major responsibilities for children's education, and recognizes the importance and potential influence of all family members, not just the parents. Even when children do not live with their parents, the vast majority return to a family each day, and someone in that family acts as the major contact with the school. The term home-school relations sounds informal and conversational, rather than planned and comprehensive, whereas partnership implies a formal alliance and contractual agreement to work toward shared goals and to share the profits or benefits of mutual investments.

Although one should not get sidetracked by semantics, the words are important if they influence the design and conduct of interactions. The terms parent involvement and home-school relations should be considered shorthand for the broader, more inclusive concept. This article summarizes the theories, research, policies, and practices that are influencing how educators and researchers think about schools and families in partnership and presents some directions for future work.

Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical perspectives on schools and families are based on the *separate*, *sequenced*, *embedded*, or *overlapping* influence of each. Changing perspectives during the past half century reflect the changing characteristics and needs of families, schools, and children in society.

Separate influence. One perspective on institutions and their relationships emphasizes the importance of their separate contributions to society. This view assumes that schools and families are most efficient and effective when their leaders maintain and pursue independent goals, standards, and activities (Parsons, 1959; Waller, 1932; Weber, 1947). Pictorially, this

model is drawn as a set of rectangles on an organizational chart that shows the clear boundaries of each institution connected by lines indicating potential lines of communication.

Separate institutions give little consideration to the ideas or histories of each other or to their common goals until there are problems. For example, when schools and families act as separate spheres of influence, teachers may never contact parents unless the students have serious learning or behavior problems, and parents may never contact the school unless their children are unusually distressed at home.

Sequenced influence. A second perspective and variation on the theme of separate responsibilities identifies a sequence of critical stages in which parents and teachers contribute in turn to child development and education. An underlying assumption of this model is that the early years of life determine later success and that parents have responsibility for the first critical stages of learning that prepare children for school. Then, educators assume major responsibility for the education of the school-aged child (Freud, 1937; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Later, young adults assume the major responsibility for their own education. Pictorially, this perspective is represented by a ladder or time line, with the family, school, and individual as three successive steps to education and progress.

Assumptions about the effectiveness of separate or sequenced organizations have been challenged as increasing numbers of parents at all educational levels gain experience in their children's early education. Families are increasingly unwilling to limit their influence only to the early years or to certain aspects of the children's development. Also, as more mothers enter the work force and use infant and child care in organized settings, the sequence of family and school responsibilities blur as early as the first weeks of life.

Embedded influence. A third perspective is based on an ecological model of nested connections between individuals and larger groups and organizations. Pictorially, this model is represented as a set of concentric circles of interaction and influence -- an embedded system, "each contained within the next" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986).

This perspective increases attention to potential effects on individuals of the multiple environments in which they are members. The ecological model focuses on the psychology of individual development and the influence of other settings and of the broad cultural system. The image of "concentric circles" does not, however, explicitly encourage questions about developmental change, nor about the cumulative influences of multiple environments across the years. The ecological model requires disaggregation and extension in order to usefully guide research on the effects on children's learning of family and school partnerships.

Overlapping influence. A social-organizational perspective of overlapping spheres of influence is a fourth model for understanding and studying school and family relationships (Epstein, 1987a). Pictorially, this model is shown as spheres that can, by design, be pushed together or be pulled apart by practices and interpersonal forces in each environment. The

extent of overlap is affected by time -- to account for changes in the ages and grade levels of students and the influence of historic change on environments, and by behavior -- to account for the background characteristics, philosophies, and practices of each environment.

Interactions may occur at a general institutional level, as when schools invite all students' families to events or send the same communications to all students' families, or at a personal level, as when a parent and teacher confer to discuss and assist the progress of a specific child. The model recognizes the interlocking histories of the major institutions that socialize and educate children and the changing and accumulating skills of individuals as the basis for studying connections that benefit children's learning and development.

Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence model integrates and extends Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, Leichter's (1974) educational insights of families as educators, Litwak and Meyer's (1974) sociological perspectives on connections of professional and nonprofessional institutions and individuals, Seeley's (1981) emphasis on shared responsibility, and a long tradition of sociological and psychological research on school and family environments and their effects.

The central role of the child. A crucial aspect of the model of overlapping spheres is the child's role in school and family partnerships. The model is based on the assumption that children's learning, development, and success, broadly defined, are the main reasons for home and school partnerships. Productive connections may contribute to improving youngster's academic skills, self-esteem, positive attitudes toward learning, independence, other achievements, accomplishments, and other behaviors characteristic of successful individuals (Epstein, 1988a, 1989). Students are not passive in this process; they are the main actors in their own success in school. When schools and families work in partnership, students hear that school is important from their parents and teachers and perceive that caring people in both environments are investing and coordinating time and resources to help them succeed. The students' own work is legitimized by this process of mutual support.

The theory of overlapping spheres of influence is designed to encourage research on the effects of specific connections of schools and families on children. Some questions are raised by the external structure: What practices -- how many and what type -- are needed in the area of overlap? How must these practices change across the years of child and adolescent development in order to benefit students? Other questions are raised by the design of the internal structure of relationships: How do different practices of partnership affect the interpersonal contacts, attitudes, and behaviors of the participants? How do these interactions affect children's motivation to learn and their successful development? What variables are needed in fully specified measurement models to adequately study the simultaneous effects of school and family partnerships?

Review of Research

During the past decade, research has progressed from studies of these institutions as separate spheres of influence to studies of ecological connections and overlapping spheres of influence. The research has examined the importance of family environments and involvement, the importance of school environments to influence family involvement, and effects on parents, students, and teachers.

The importance of family environments and involvement. Research on family environments for more than a quarter century shows that children have advantages when their parents support and encourage school activities (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfeld & York, 1966; Dave, 1963; Epstein, 1983; Epstein & McPartland, 1979; Marjoribanks, 1979; McDill & Rigsby, 1973. Also see Scott-Jones' 1984 review of family influences on cognitive development and school achievement.). This research asks whether home environments influence children's achievement and which family practices affect children's learning and success in school. These early studies rely on surveys of students who report about their families. Often, the research is cast in terms of separate or competing influences of schools or families.

This research tradition continues in studies that examine variations in family environments and activities. As in the early studies, results show that, on average, families with higher socioeconomic status (SES) and education are more invested and involved in their children's education, and their children achieve more (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Coleman, 1987; Entwisle, Alexander, Cadigan, & Pallas, 1986; Lareau, 1987; Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Useem, 1990). A recurring theme in many of these studies is that less-educated or poor parents cannot or do not want to become involved in their children's education. Yet, the results of many of these studies also indicate that parents' practices of involvement compensate for less education or less income to benefit children.

One major message of the early and continuing studies is simply and clearly that families are important for children's learning, development, and school success across the grades. The research suggests that students at all grade levels do better academic work and have more positive school attitudes, higher aspirations, and other positive behaviors, if they have parents who are aware, knowledgeable, encouraging, and involved. The studies include few measures of school or teachers' practices to involve parents, or parents' responses to particular practices.

The importance of school environments to influence family involvement. The consistency of evidence of family influence and benefits to students has led to a new line of research that asks a two-part question: If families are so important, how can schools enable more families -- especially those parents who would not become involved on their own -- to become and stay involved in their children's education? And, if schools do this, do children, families, and teachers benefit from increased and improved family and school partnerships?

Research is beginning to provide evidence of the effects of school and family partnerships on students, parents, and teachers at all grade levels. Although many of the studies are small, the commonality of findings from research using different methodologies strengthens their credibility.

Effects on students. The primary goal of school and family partnerships -- the bottom line for many educators -- is to increase student motivation, achievement, and success in school. Research on the effects on students of family and school connections has improved over the years from suggestive to more focused studies.

Gordon (1979), Gordon, Olmsted, Rubin, and True (1979), Valentine and Stark (1979), Zigler (1979), and others studied Head Start and Follow-Through programs. These studies report positive effects of the programs on parents and young children, but the measures of involvement and influence were incomplete, and specific connections between parents and teachers were not measured.

Several studies suggest that parent assistance at home (as opposed to a few parents participating at the school building) has important consequences for children's achievement, attendance, school adaptability, and classroom behavior (Comer, 1980; Gotts, 1980; Rich, Van Dien, & Mattox, 1979). The measures in these studies lack the rigor needed to isolate and document specific effects on students of particular practices. Rich and Jones (1977) present early evidence that extra learning time at home produces gains in early elementary students' reading scores equivalent to those made by students in more expensive pull-out programs in schools.

Fifth grade students whose teachers and parents use frequent parent involvement practices report more positive attitudes toward school, regular homework habits, similarity and familiarity between the school and their family, and more homework on weekends (Epstein, 1982). Thus student motivation and school-related behaviors are influenced by teachers' practices to involve parents.

In a study linking teacher practices, parent responses, and changes in student achievement, students in grades three and five gain more in reading achievement test scores (but not math scores) from fall to spring if their teachers frequently involve parents in learning activities at home (Epstein, in press). Most teachers request parent involvement in reading-related activities, indicating potentially important subject-specific connections between parent involvement and children's gains in achievement.

Synthesizing the studies of many researchers, Henderson (1987) concludes that students at all grade levels are likely to benefit from family involvement. Most of the studies reviewed, however, focus on the well-proven family influence on achievement and not on effects of school practices to involve families who would not otherwise be involved. Most omit measures of direct connections between particular school and family practices and longitudinal

measures of achievement to determine whether students improve over time because of these partnerships. Despite some recent attention, the most pressing need is for more rigorous, analytic research on the effects on students of specific practices of partnership.

Effects on parents. Another goal of school and family partnerships--perhaps the most obvious one and the one most easy to produce in the short term--is to increase the number of families who are actively involved in their children's education. This involvement includes improving parents' knowledge about child development, parenting skills, and the quality of parent-child, parent-parent, and parent-teacher interactions and relationships. Data obtained directly from parents contribute important information about the benefits to parents of family and school connections.

Parents of children in preschool and elementary grades presently receive more help from teachers on how to become involved at school and at home. Parent involvement declines dramatically with each passing grade and level of schooling (Dauber & Epstein, in press; Epstein, 1986; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). This decline is especially severe in the middle grades and high schools, where teachers define themselves as subject-matter specialists and where fewer teachers give attention to the whole child.

Most parents want to know how to help their children at home and how to stay involved with their children's education. Despite a real decline in teachers' practices to involve parents in the upper grades, parents of children at all grade levels want schools to keep them informed about their children's instructional programs and progress (Epstein and Herrick, 1991; Herrick and Epstein, 1991). Over 90% of parents of elementary and middle grades students believe that the school should tell them how to help at home (Dauber & Epstein, in press; Epstein, 1986). This desire remains high -- over 80% -- for parents of public high school students (Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988) and for parents of children in Catholic high schools (P. Bauch, 1988).

Most parents help their children at home at times, but do not know whether they are doing the right things or doing things right. Educated parents more successfully translate information into actual family practices to help manage and monitor the education of their early adolescents (Baker & Stevenson, 1986). Many low-income and less-educated parents of middle grades students report that they need to know more about school programs in order to help their children (Dauber & Epstein, in press; Leitch & Tangri, 1988). Many of the more promising programs for increasing middle grades students' success involve parents, and when guided, the parents of older children respond (Epstein & Salinas, 1992a).

Even in the early grades, some parents help their children with the best of intentions but without much information about how to help. Scott-Jones (1987) reports that low-income, minority parents of first-grade students vary in ability to help their children on their own, with some help being of questionable value. It is becoming very clear that information must be given to families by the schools on how to help in productive ways at all grade levels.

Parents are influenced by teachers who are leaders in the use of parent involvement practices (Epstein, 1986). Parents whose children are in these teacher-leaders' classrooms are significantly more likely than other parents to report that they:

(a) receive many ideas of how to help at home from the teachers;
(b) believe that the teacher wants them to help their children at home;
(c) understand more than in previous years about what their child is being taught in school; and
(d) rate the teacher higher in overall teaching ability and in interpersonal skills.

In urban elementary and middle schools, parents who report that their children's schools or teachers use particular types of involvement are significantly more likely than other parents to become partners in their children's education (Dauber & Epstein, in press).

Most parents cannot and do not participate at the school building (P. Bauch, 1988; Comer, 1980; Dauber & Epstein, in press; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Leitch & Tangri, 1988; Zigler & Turner, 1982). About 4% of elementary school parents are active at school 25 days or more each year, but over 70% never volunteer. Over 60% work full time or part time during the school day, making traditionally organized volunteer work difficult or impossible (Epstein, 1986).

Few parents participate directly in school decisions as leaders or representatives of other parents by serving as PTA leaders; as members of advisory committees, Chapter 1 committees, or school improvement councils; or in other leadership opportunities (P. Bauch, 1988; Comer, 1980; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Epstein, 1986; Leitch & Tangri, 1988).

Parents respond in different ways to requests for involvement. For example, single mothers and mothers who work outside the home are less likely than other parents to come to the school for meetings or workshops (Espinoza, 1988) but are as or more likely to spend time helping their children at home on school work (Epstein, 1990; Herrick & Epstein, 1991). These patterns are not unique to the United States. Studies in Australia (Toomey, 1990), Austria (Krumm, Astleither, Herder & Moosbrucher, 1990), Spain (Martinez-Gonzalez, 1990), and Portugal (Davies, 1988a) document the diversity of parents' and schools' skills at partnership.

Researchers have begun to study how parents of all educational and cultural backgrounds teach their children and work with schools, including African American families (Clark, 1983; Comer, 1980, 1988; McAdoo, 1981; Scott-Jones, 1987); Chinese American families (Sung, 1987; Siu, 1992); Hispanic families (Canino, Earley,& Rogler, 1989; Delgado & Humm-Delgado, 1982; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Moll & Greenberg, in press); and others. Many studies are needed that examine effects of school and family partnership activities on families with different backgrounds and needs.

Effects on teachers. A third major goal of school and family connections is to help school administrators and teachers conduct more effective school programs so that more students succeed. Teachers agree overwhelmingly that parent involvement contributes to more effective teaching, more successful students, and more positive school climates, but only about half believe that they can change parents' behaviors (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Krumm, Astleither, Herder, & Moosbrucher, 1990).

Teachers report more positive feelings about teaching and about their school when there is more parent involvement at the school (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1987; Leitch & Tangri, 1988). Teachers who frequently involve parents in their children's education rate all parents higher, on average, in helpfulness and follow through than do other teachers. Teachers who are leaders in parent involvement do not make as many stereotypic judgments about poor parents, less-educated parents, or single parents as other teachers (Epstein, 1990). Working with families, then, raises teachers' expectations and appreciation of parents as partners.

Parents and principals rate teachers higher in overall teaching ability and interpersonal skills if the teachers frequently involve parents (Epstein, 1985). Teachers' self-confidence may be boosted by high ratings and appreciation from administrators and parents, which in turn may bolster their sense of efficacy and their willingness to continue and to expand practices of parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987).

Elementary school programs of parent involvement presently are stronger, more positive, and more comprehensive than those in the middle or high school grades. Teachers in self-contained classrooms (mainly in the elementary grades) report stronger programs and practices of parent involvement than teachers in departmentalized classrooms (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Teachers in self-contained classes have fewer students to teach and make more frequent and diverse contacts with parents. They may feel more familiar with a small number of parents or more fully responsible for the students' school programs, including connections with families.

Teachers differ in their practices to involve families according to the subjects they teach. Teachers of reading and English use more practices to involve parents in their children's learning activities at home, including involvement in assignments related to their specific subjects (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Teachers of math, science, and social studies may need even more assistance than other teachers to understand how to involve parents in their children's learning in those subjects.

Teachers in highly discrepant environments (where teachers believe that they differ in attitudes from others at the school) report weaker programs of parent involvement. Teachers in less discrepant environments (where teachers think they are more similar to other administrators, teachers, and parents) report stronger, more comprehensive programs of parent involvement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991).

Teachers in inner-city schools report that they want all parents to perform more than a dozen helpful activities in the elementary and middle grades. But few schools have programs to help parents understand how to conduct these activities with their children at different grade levels. Teachers at all grade levels tend to blame parents for their low level of involvement (Davies, 1988a, 1988b; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Leitch & Tangri, 1988). Yet other teachers--sometimes in the same schools -- successfully involve similar parents in their children's education as a part of regular teaching practice.

Teachers and parents disagree in their ideas of whether parents are involved or want to be involved (Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Leitch & Tangri, 1988). Teachers in urban, Chapter 1 schools report that most parents are not involved in their children's education and do not want to be. Parents in the same schools report that they are involved with their children at home in various ways but that they need more and better information from teachers about how to help at home (Dauber & Epstein, in press). In a study of three different cultural areas -- Boston, Massachusetts; Liverpool, England; and several cities in Portugal -- Davies (1988a) found these same self-fulfilling teacher beliefs and practices.

New research is needed to explore the effects on teaching practices of specific types of parent involvement. Other topics of importance include how teachers design homework, follow up homework in class, and show sensitivity to families in their curriculum, instruction, and management.

The Importance of Developmental Patterns and Common and Differentiated Practices

The theories and research of the past decade reveal two basic qualities in the connections between schools and families. First, effective practices of partnership are developmental. Second, effective practices of partnership are responsive to the common and different needs of families, so that all families feel equally welcome at school and included in their children's education and so that schools find ways to inform and involve families with unique histories, strengths, and needs.

Developmental Practices. Practices to involve families must change for students at different ages, grades, and levels of maturity, for parents at various points in life and for educators at different school and grade levels. Educators have only begun to learn how partnerships can maximize the healthy development and achievement of children across the preschool, elementary, middle, and high school grades.

Preschool and elementary grades. The main goal of family and school connections in the early years is to establish and strengthen children's cognitive, personal, and social development and their readiness for learning in school. In the early years, schools and families learn to respect and assist each other in sharing responsibilities for their children. Most of the

studies discussed in the preceding section were conducted in the preschool or elementary grades. The quality of early partnerships establishes patterns and relationships that encourage or discourage parents to continue to communicate with their children's teachers in later years.

Even in the early grades, however, there is room for improvement. Most families of preschool children are not informed or regularly involved in important and cumulative ways (Kagan, 1989; Kagan, Powell, Weissbourd & Zigler, 1987; Powell, 1989; Zigler and Turner, 1982). Systematic evaluations also are needed of the effects of specific practices of family involvement on the success of children in the elementary grades (Herrick and Epstein, 1991).

Middle and high school grades. The years of early adolescence (ages 11-14) in the middle grades and late adolescence (ages 15-19) in high school grades may be the most challenging for youngsters and for their families and schools. Families and schools have typically worked separately to solve the social, academic, and personal problems that increase in the middle grades, such as truancy, failure, grade retention, and discipline problems. Uncoordinated problem solving has resulted in well-known but unacceptable statistics on school dropout, youth unemployment, gang membership, drug and alcohol abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, and other problems (Wheelock & Dorman, 1989) that affect students' success in school, their futures, and their families' futures.

Compared to parents of elementary school students, parents of older students must deal with more impersonal settings in large middle schools and high schools that often are far from home. To become partners in these settings, parents need even more self-confidence, negotiation skills, information-gathering skills, and intervention techniques than do parents of young children (Useem, 1990) but typically get far less assistance from schools (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Even less information is given to parents of students in schools that serve educationally and economically disadvantaged students (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1990). Thus families who may need the most information in useful forms are presently receiving the least.

Across the grades, but particularly in the middle and high school grades, students need encouragement to take challenges, persist in difficult work, deal with failure as well as success, and understand the importance of hard work in school (Bempechat & Ginsburg, 1990). Families who receive information in useful forms can help schools help students reach these goals (Epstein and Herrick, 1991).

Research is needed on school and family connections in early and late adolescence in order to understand better how to help more students succeed and to prevent or reduce serious problems that interfere with student success in school in the middle and high school grades.

Common and Differentiated Practices. At certain times, all families are hard to reach, but some schools find some families particularly difficult to contact and involve. The "hard to reach" include those whose physical, social, or psychological distance from the school place

extra barriers in the school's or family's path, and make communication and interaction even more difficult than usual.

Epstein and Scott-Jones (in press) describe various families that some schools find hard to reach based on the age of the students (particularly parents of students in the upper grades); age of parent (including parents younger and older than average and particularly adolescent parents); parental background (including less-educated and language-minority families); family structure (including fathers, single parents, parents of adolescent parents, parents who work outside the home, or otherwise organized families); and family proximity and familiarity (including families new to the school and families of students bussed great distances). Other families may be hard to reach if they have serious personal problems (e.g., parents who are homeless, unemployed, drug users, alcoholic, or mentally ill). These and other serious problems concerning health, jobs, food, housing, and other basic requirements may prevent families from fulfilling their basic obligations to provide for their children or participating in their children's schooling. Some families need help from schools to locate community social services before they can increase their involvement. But, the number of hard-to-reach families is much smaller than many believe.

Some educators, however, have found ways to involve the types of families that others consider unreachable. Research is needed to identify practices that should be common for all families and those that should be differentiated to involve effectively parents with special needs or who cannot easily come to school or communicate with teachers.

Tying Research to Practice

The results of many studies and various efforts to define involvement suggest that within the area of overlap of the family and school spheres of influence, five important types of involvement help families and schools fulfill their shared responsibilities for children's learning and development (Epstein, 1987b) and a sixth type of involvement adds the community as a sphere of influence.

Type 1: Basic obligations of families. Families are responsible for providing for children's health and safety, developing parenting skills and child-rearing approaches that prepare children for school and that maintain healthy child development across grades, and building positive home conditions that support learning and behavior all across the school years. Schools help families to develop the knowledge and skills they need to understand their children at each grade level through workshops at the school or in other locations and in other forms of parent education, training, and information giving.

Type 2: Basic obligations of schools. The schools are responsible for communicating with families about school programs and children's progress. Communications include the notices, phone calls, visits, report cards, and conferences with parents that most schools provide. Other innovative communications include information to help families to choose or

change schools and to help families help students select curricula, courses, special programs and activities, and other opportunities at each grade level. Schools vary the forms and frequency of communications and greatly affect whether the information sent home can be understood by all families. Schools strengthen partnerships by encouraging two-way communications.

Type 3: Involvement at school. Parents and other volunteers who assist teachers, administrators, and children in classrooms or in other areas of the school are involved, as are families who come to school to support student performances, sports, or other events. Schools improve and vary schedules so that more families are able to participate as volunteers and as audiences. Schools recruit and train volunteers so that they are helpful to teachers, students, and school improvement efforts at school and in other locations.

Type 4: Involvement in learning activities at home. Teachers request and guide parents to monitor and assist their own children at home. Teachers assist parents in how to interact with their children on learning activities at home that are coordinated with the children's classwork or that advance or enrich learning. Schools enable families to understand how to help their children at home by providing information on academic and other skills required of students to pass each grade, with directions on how to monitor, discuss, and help with homework and practice and reinforce needed skills.

Type 5: Involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy. Parents and others in the community serve in participatory roles in the PTA/PTO, Advisory Councils, Chapter 1 programs, school site management teams, or other committees or school groups. Parents also may become activists in independent advocacy groups in the community. Schools assist parents to be leaders and representatives by training them in decision-making skills and in how to communicate with all of the parents they represent; by including parents as true, not token, contributors to school decisions, and by providing information to community advocacy groups so that they may knowledgeably address issues of school improvement.

Schools with comprehensive programs encompassing the five types of involvement help parents to build home conditions for learning, communicate with the schools, become productive volunteers at school, take responsibilities at home to support and motivate learning and development, and contribute to decisions that affect the schools and their children. There are, in fact, hundreds of practices from which schools may choose to operationalize each type of involvement.

Although the effects of most practices have not been well evaluated, a few programs have been examined. For example, Witt, Hannafin, and Martens (1983) conclude that teacher-guided, home-based reinforcement programs help parents to praise and encourage children and increase children's success in school. MacVicar, Pratt, and Robins (1990) report promising effects on children's achievement when teachers guide parents in helping with homework.

Mullen (1988) confirms that parents appreciate teachers who regularly and clearly inform and involve them in their children's math homework with the Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) process (Epstein & Salinas, 1992b). Family Math documents positive responses of parents to math activities with their children at the school (Kreinberg & Thompson, 1986).

Evidence is building that teachers can implement practices that change their own attitudes about families and that parents respond to information and guidance to help their children as students. School-based projects, such as Schools Reaching Out (Davies, 1991; Krasnow, 1990) and the Baltimore School and Family Connections Project (Epstein and Herrick, 1991; Herrick & Epstein, 1991) show that inner city schools and families can apply the five types of involvement. In Illinois rural and suburban schools, teachers demonstrate that they can work to simultaneously improve classroom organization and connections with families (Ames, 1989).

Some programs use technology to contact busy or distant families who cannot come to the school. For example, families interact with schools on local Cable TV in Indianapolis, where a homework hotline is linked to a local station so that children and families get visual answers to questions about homework assignments (Warner, 1991). Schools are working to solve problems of low attendance at workshops held at the school by providing information from the workshops in other forms, such as tape recordings, videocassettes, summaries, newsletters, computerized messages, and other print and nonprint forms (Chrispeels, Bourta & Daugherty, 1988), or by using effective home visits and parent-to-parent exchanges (Cochran & Henderson, 1986; Davies, 1991). Schools are attempting to solve communication problems through computerized phone systems at the school or district level (J. Bauch, 1989), with answering machines in schools or classrooms that send and receive timely messages. Schools are training volunteers for clear and productive roles (Epstein and Dauber, 1989) by organizing volunteer work to include activities that parents conduct at the school during the school day, before or after school, on weekends, at home, or in the community to support school programs and student success (Michael, 1990; Taranto, 1983). Educators at many other urban, suburban, and rural elementary, middle, and high schools in the country (though still a limited subset of all schools) are beginning to understand and implement practices of partnerships with families (Phi Delta Kappan, 1991).

The limited evidence available indicates that the specific types of involvement lead to different outcomes for parents, teachers, and students (Brandt, 1989; Epstein, 1986). Research is needed that provides information on the effects of specific practices so that schools can more purposely choose practices to help them obtain specific benefits from their investments in school and family connections.

Our five types of involvement reflect families and schools working together within their overlapping spheres of influence. Another sphere of influence is the community, which offers varied resources to support children's learning (Epstein & Scott-Jones, in press; Levy &

Copple, 1989; Unger & Sussman, 1990). Community refers to the child's home neighborhood, the school neighborhood, school context, and the wider local community of business, civic, cultural, religious, and other organizations and agencies that influence children's learning and development and that could enhance family and school influences on children. Community resources can greatly benefit children at all ages when they are organized and deployed in school, family, and community partnerships (Coleman, 1988; Epstein, 1988a; Kagan, 1989; Kirst & McLaughlin, 1990; McLaughlin & Smrekar, 1988). A sixth type of involvement reflects this three-way partnership and is a potentially important component in schools' comprehensive programs for involving families in their children's education (California State Board of Education, 1988).

Type 6: Collaboration and exchange with community organizations. Schools collaborate with agencies, businesses, cultural organizations, and other groups to share responsibility for children's education and future success. Collaboration includes school programs that provide or coordinate children and families' access to community and support services, such as before- and after-school care, health services, cultural events, and other programs. Schools vary in how much they know about and draw on community resources to enhance and enrich the curriculum and other student experiences. Schools assist families with information on community resources that can help strengthen home conditions and assist children's learning and development.

This type of involvement was not part of the research that helped identify the five major types of involvement in school and family partnerships. The addition of community to the model as a third overlapping sphere of influence opens a complex and relatively unexplored research agenda. New research is needed to determine whether this is a separate type of involvement and, if it is, how it differs from the others. For example, school-community, family-community, and school-family-community connections may have separate and combined effects on children's learning. Or, community groups and individuals may provide resources to strengthen the other five types of school and family connections. Other types of involvement and different typologies will be suggested by other researchers and practitioners and will require study (Jackson & Cooper, 1989).

Looking Ahead

Although much has been learned about the nature, extent, and effects of practices and policies that demonstrate family and school overlap, there are many unknowns, challenges, tensions, and potential pitfalls to implementing programs and practices of school and family connections (Lightfoot, 1978; Swap, 1990). The tensions, expected in a model of overlapping spheres of influence, are not intractable. The research and evaluation agenda for the 1990s must increase basic knowledge and help educators and families understand what their choices are for creating more productive partnerships, how to put specific practices in place, and what benefits or problems are likely to result from their investments. In addition to linkages with the community, two other significant topics have not been adequately addressed in previous work

and require intensive new investments in the 1990s: the education and training of educators and the development of policies to guide practices at the federal, state, community, district, and school levels.

Education and training. The future of school and family partnerships rests on improving teacher and administrator education and training. Presently, few teachers receive systematic or comprehensive education concerning families as organizations, families' roles in children's education, or the connections of schools and families across the grades (Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Stallworth & Williams, 1981).

In most teacher education and education administration programs, parents are discussed in mainly negative terms as problems to "deal with," not as partners with shared interests and responsibilities for education. Teachers and administrators are rarely given information on issues that they must address every day -- diversity in family structures, cultures, and strengths -- or about the theory, research, and practical programs for making successful connections with families across the grades. Needed are designs and evaluations of alternative approaches in preservice, in-service, advanced education, and experience in practice teaching, internships, and other forms.

Policy development. The future of school and family partnerships also depends on improving policies and leadership at the federal, state, community, school district, and school levels. Not yet clear is how specific policies and combinations of policies on parental involvement and other school and family issues affect the participants, especially children's learning (Davies, 1991; Haskins & Adams, 1983; Nardine & Morris, 1991; Zeldin, 1990).

Many policies have been designed to influence school and family partnerships. Examples include state certification requirements for teachers to demonstrate their expertise in parent involvement (e.g., in Washington State); state policies and legislation (Solomon, 1991) and district policies (Chrispeels, 1991) on parent involvement; state and federal grant competitions for demonstration programs (Chapman, 1991; Lueder, 1989); state mandates for district and school councils (Keesling & Melaragno, 1983); state legislation for parental leave for school conferences (e.g., in Minnesota); district policies requiring translators at school meetings and conferences and for phone calls so that non-English proficient parents and teachers can talk with each other (Chrispeels, 1991); and others.

Outlook. At all grade levels, the development of partnerships will require new ways of thinking about the shared responsibilities for children. It is not only families that need more information and assistance to be effective partners, however. Educators need to know more about the families of their students in order to capitalize on family strengths in helping children succeed, particularly in schools that serve urban, poor, minority, educationally disadvantaged, or culturally diverse students and families.

Considerable attention has been given to the president's and governors' goal that by the year 2000 all children will be ready for school (National Governors' Association, 1990). Most discussions about reaching this goal focus on family practices and on preschool and other programs to increase the learning and development of very young children. An equally important goal has not received as much attention -- the goal of helping all schools be ready for children and their families. This requires teachers and administrators who understand families who enter with different backgrounds, experiences, and needs.

In the 1980s, studies of school practices to involve families challenged the assumption that family background or status determine family effectiveness or the ability or the willingness to encourage, motivate, and interact with their children as students. The studies show, for example, that some poor and minority parents are involved in their children's education and that school and teachers' practices affect whether and how less-educated parents are involved. There is increasing evidence that family and school partnership practices are more important for children's success than family structures or ascriptive characteristics, such as race, social class, level of parent education, marital status, income, language of family, family size, or age of child. The more that schools do to involve families, the less these status variables seem to explain parental behavior or children's success.

Researchers have labeled parents' knowledge, competence, confidence, and actions about their children's education as cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lareau, 1987); social capital (Coleman, 1987); management skills (Baker & Stevenson, 1986); funds of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, in press); school-like families (Epstein, 1987a); and other terms that indicate that some parents (not only well-educated or middle-class parents) have or develop important knowledge about parenting, family influence, and school that helps their children succeed. Just as important for the concept of overlapping spheres of influence is the fact that some schools -- family-like schools -- gain important knowledge about families and their strengths to establish productive partnerships. Regardless of the terms used for the useful store of information that parents obtain and use to help their children, research is needed on the effects of specific processes and practices of partnership.

Many questions about families remain (e.g., What do families teach? How do families of different racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds support children's education at home and their school careers? How can all parents help their children to succeed in school across the grades? How does school restructuring require new ways to work with families?).

The crucial questions for the 1990s, however, are about the effects of school and family connections (e.g., How can schools involve the families who are presently most difficult to reach? How can schools and families work together to boost student motivation to learn?). Other questions must be answered about the education and training of professionals (e.g., How effective are courses and experiences that prepare teachers and administrators for their work with children and their families?); about policy development (e.g., How do policies at the federal, state, community, district, school, and classroom levels work and combine to

improve children's learning and other desired results?); and about theoretical and measurement models (e.g., What research and measurement models, variables, and methods produce new knowledge about the complex and dynamic relationships among the institutions that share responsibility for children's learning and development?). Although studying schools and families simultaneously is more difficult than studying either environment alone, researchers have to take that challenge in order to understand and to improve children's learning and development, family functioning, and school responsiveness.

In his review of research on home-school relations in the last edition of the Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Bosco (1982) summarized the three main topics of school and family connections in the 1970s: beliefs and opinions about the importance of parent involvement, barriers to home-school relations, and a few examples of practices. Researchers struggled with the definitions of parent involvement and terms for the roles and relations of parents and teachers. One decade later, real progress has been made. The 1980s set the field of school and family connections on a positive course. As the 1990s begin, the focus of research and practice is clearly on partnerships and shared responsibilities. New outlines have been drawn that need to be filled in with better programs, practices, policies, research, and evaluations to further define and strengthen this growing field of study.

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